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WHY YOUNG MEN SHOULD STUDY SHAKESPEARE

BY

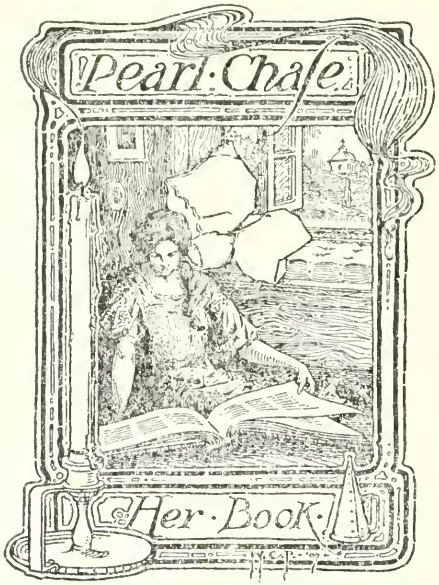
C. ALPHONSO SMITH

HOW TO STUDY SHAKESPEARE

BY

HAMILTON WRIGHT MABIE

THE UNIVERSITY SOCIETY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The University Society

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WHY YOUNG MEN SHOULD STUDY SHAKESPEARE

By C. ALPHONSO SMITH

For a Knowledge of History.—"Men differ from the lower animals, in part," says Professor C. C. Everett, in his "Ethics for Young People," "because whatever one generation gains is passed on to the next, so that each starts with some little advantage over the one that went before it." But we do not inherit this knowledge; we are not born "heirs of all the ages." Every young man or woman who wishes to get the advantage of the generations that have gone before and make a fair start with the one that is just beginning must study history; for history, in the largest sense, is the record of what the race has thought and done. And in the realm of history, as both teacher and interpreter, it would be hard to overestimate the influence of Shakespeare.

Shakespeare's historical dramas give history in so vital and attractive a form that for many readers they have usurped the place of text-books of history. Walter Scott, the founder of the historical novel, did little more than carry on the work begun by Shakespeare, that of popularizing the great characters and the leading events of history. So vivid is the dramatist's portrayal that the names of Cæsar, Brutus, Antony, Cleopatra, Coriolanus, Troilus, Cressida, and others are inseparably linked with the name of Shakespeare.

But in the domain of English history our debt to Shakespeare is still greater. "All the English history that I know," said the Duke of Marlborough, "I learned from Shakespeare." In Shakespeare's day, Warwick-

shire, in whose borders the decisive battles of the Wars of the Roses had been fought, was a storehouse of history and legend. A wealth of material had been handed down by oral tradition. The battle of Bosworth Field was fought only eighty years before Shakespeare's birth. Thus the history that he narrates is the history that he must have heard recounted in his youth and early manhood.

This gives a peculiar value to Shakespeare's English historical plays, a value that historians are just beginning to appreciate. In the preface to "The Houses of York and Lancaster," Mr. James Gairdner says: "For this period of English history we are fortunate in possessing an unrivaled interpreter in our great dramatic poet Shakespeare. Following the guidance of such a master mind, we realize for ourselves the men and actions of the period in a way we cannot do in any other epoch. . . . The doings of that stormy age, the sad calamities endured by kings, the sudden changes of fortune endured by great men, the glitter of chivalry, and the horrors of civil war, all left a deep impression upon the mind of the nation, which was kept alive by vivid traditions of the past *at the time that our great dramatist wrote.*"

Shakespeare's nearness, therefore, in time and place to the events that he records—to say nothing of his unrivaled powers of insight and presentation—not only gives him an advantage over modern historians, but makes him a peculiarly fitting guide for those who are just entering upon the serious study of English history.

For Maxims of Conduct.—"Three-fourths of our daily thought," says Matthew Arnold, "is devoted to questions of conduct. In the case of the young, in whom conduct has not yet crystallized into matured and unconscious habit, the proportion would be nearer four-fifths."

To realize the influence of Shakespeare in the direc-

tion of conduct and in the formation of character one needs only to remember that as an English classic Shakespeare ranks next to the Bible, Shakespeare and the Bible having long since become a current phrase. And one has only to glance over a book of Shakespeare quotations, noting the number and familiarity of those that interpret or enforce conduct, to see that there is sound basis for the popular grouping of Shakespeare with so authoritative a book of conduct as the English Bible.

As a guide in conduct Shakespeare is quoted consciously and unconsciously by learned and unlearned alike, for his dramas are essentially studies in conduct. In these dramas personal responsibility is never merged or abjured; a man remains the architect of his own fortunes. The ghosts, dreams, and witches occasionally employed by Shakespeare do not compel conduct; they only illustrate it. Hamlet suspected his uncle before the appearance of his father's spirit; Clarence's dream was but the confession of guilt; Macbeth was a murderer at heart before he became a prey to "supernatural soliciting."

When Cassius says,

> "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
> But in ourselves, that we are underlings,"

he touches upon one of the central differences between the Greek drama and the Elizabethan drama; he suggests also the chief reason why Shakespeare has furnished so many more maxims of conduct than Æschylus, Sophocles, or Euripides. The Greek dramatists portrayed man as evil-starred or fortune-starred at birth; he was a mere puppet in the hands of fate. With wider vision and clearer insight Shakespeare puts the emphasis not on fate or destiny but on character and conduct; not only crimes but venial sins, mere errors of judgment, carry within them the seeds of their own

punishment. It is this fruitful and essentially ethical point of view that has stored Shakespeare's pages with maxims of daily conduct. It is this that invests his characters with so vital a significance for all those who are reaching up into maturity and who, beginning to feel the possibilities of life, wish to probe deeper into its meaning and to know the principles of its right conduct.

For a Better Knowledge of Human Nature.—"All the world 's a stage," says Shakespeare, and of the men and women who play their parts upon it he has not merely sketched, but completely individualized two hundred and forty-six. In mere number Balzac surpasses Shakespeare; but when we consider not only the gross number but the variety of types and the clearness and fulness with which they are portrayed, Shakespeare takes easy supremacy over all other writers, ancient and modern. George Eliot has individualized one hundred and seven characters, Dickens one hundred and two, and Thackeray forty, their sum total being hardly more than equal to Shakespeare's single output.

It is a mere truism to say that no one may hope for success in any calling to-day without a knowledge of human nature. In many vocations—and these the highest—success is not only conditioned on but proportioned to an insight into character. No one can expect to become a successful preacher, teacher, doctor, editor, lawyer, or business man, who does not have a keen appreciation of the motives that govern men in the ordinary affairs of life. Knowledge in this domain is power and influence, while ignorance is weakness and inefficiency.

The knowledge of human nature that a young man or woman has gained from experience and observation may be good as far as it goes; but it is neither wide enough nor deep enough, and is purchased in many cases by needless errors and heartaches. "The essence of provincialism," says Mr. Mabie, in "Books and Culture," "is a substitution of a part for the whole; the

acceptance of the local experience, knowledge, and standards as possessing the authority of the universal experience, knowledge, and standards; the local experience is entirely true in its own sphere; it becomes misleading when it is accepted as the experience of all time and all men."

For a knowledge of men and women as deep as it is wide, for insight into social life as well as individual life, for appreciation of the depths to which an over-tempted nature may descend or the heights to which, in spite of hostile environment, a determined spirit may rise—Shakespeare remains our supreme teacher. There is no text-book of human nature taught in our schools or colleges; such a text-book may be found in Shakespeare. Three centuries have served only to accentuate his preeminence and to enhance his authority as a guide through the mazes and inconsistencies of our common nature.

For Training in Expression.—It would seem at first glance as if blank verse written three hundred years ago could help but little to-day in training one to speak and write clear and forceful prose. While it is true that Macaulay, Hawthorne, and Kipling, for example, furnish something not found in Shakespeare, it is also true that Shakespeare furnishes still more that is not found in them.

The art of composition is to see clearly and to see whole. Whatever be the theme, if the writer or speaker has first *individualized* it, his words will be clear and apt; if he has then viewed it *in its relations*, whether these be the relations of similarity or contrast, of mere analogy or illustration, his treatment will be vital and impressive. In these two respects, the ability to see clearly and to see whole, Shakespeare is as yet unrivaled.

Every character that he has portrayed, every plot that he has employed, every incident narrated, every scene

described, and every sentence constructed shows that the great dramatist had seen before he wrote. He had so communed with his characters and so thought through his plots that he knew the very lineaments of the one and every possible unfolding of the other. Shakespeare's work may have been done quickly; it could not have been done hastily. Thought and emotion were held in solution until they precipitated in sharp and definite outline. In spite of obsolete words and idioms, his style is a model of clearness and vividness; it is a series of pictures the study of which is a liberal education in that clearness and directness of vision which must precede any attempt at clearness of presentation.

But clearness is not enough. Euclid and Blackstone are as clear as Shakespeare. What is the secret of Shakespeare's wealth of illustration, analogy, and contrast? May the secret be learned? The principle at least may be learned; it is the principle followed by every writer or speaker who has touched the heart and imagination. Shakespeare not only visualized his characters and incidents as units in themselves, he saw them as organic parts of a larger whole. To see a thing in its entirety one must see it in its relations to other things. Every illustration employed by a writer or speaker—whether it be drawn from nature, art, history, or experience—is the statement of a suggested relationship and is prompted by this faculty of seeing things in their connections.

To see clearly one must see individually; to see as a whole one must see collectively. Both faculties may be greatly increased by training; the first demands more of the intellect, the second of the imagination; the one separates, the other combines; the one may be compared to a straight line, the other to a surface. And in both, Shakespeare offers to young and old alike an inexhaustible store of material for study and practise. At his touch the abstract becomes concrete, the ideal real, the remote near, the shadowy substantial, the invisible

visible. To appreciate his style at the very outset of one's career, before vague and ineffective methods of expression have become ingrained, is to drink at a source of unfailing pleasure and of increasing power.

For Culture.—Culture implies growth. It is the unfolding of the mind and heart that comes from contact with what is best and highest. It means enrichment of character and emancipation from what is low and provincial. No one, especially if in the impressionable years of early manhood or womanhood, can commune with Shakespeare's characters or think Shakespeare's thoughts after him without receiving an access of culture. Intellect, imagination, and sympathy are enlarged. The limitations of time and space cease to be felt. The reader shares in the fulness of universal truth; he feels afresh the depth of Shakespeare's remark that—

> "All places that the eye of Heaven visits
> Are to a wise man ports and happy events";

he assimilates the wit and wisdom and beauty of a race that was already "foremost in the files of time" when Shakespeare became its spokesman; he sees new meanings in life, feels a new awe in its mysteries, a new depth even in its homelier aspects, and a new stimulus in its possibilities. Old things seem new to him by the novelty of their presentation, and new things seem old because of the force and directness with which they are brought home to his consciousness. Insensibly he ceases to admire what is crude, shallow, fragmentary, and inartistic; and grows into appreciation of what is true, vital, whole, and harmonious. He is made to realize that life is more than thought, and that sympathy and imagination have a depth and richness beyond the reach of intellect and learning.

But culture is not only growth through ideas and feelings; it is growth through will and service. Shake-

speare portrays men not in isolated but in close relation to the society about them. He viewed them, as we have seen, not only as individuals, but as social factors. The most fruitful lesson to be learned from Shakespeare is culture as social service, a lesson incomparably phrased in the dramatist's own words:—

"Heaven doth with us as we with torches do,
Not light them for themselves; for if our virtues
Did not go forth of us, 'twere all alike
As if we had them not. Spirits are not finely touched
But to fine issues."

How to Study Shakespeare

By HAMILTON WRIGHT MABIE

"You might read all the books in the British Museum, if you could live long enough, and remain an entirely illiterate, uneducated person. But if you read ten pages of a good book, letter by letter—that is to say, with real accuracy—you are forevermore, in some measure, an educated person."—RUSKIN.

IT is one thing to read and another thing to study; and yet reading is the chief means and the best method of study when one is trying to understand a writer or a piece of literature. The lover of Shakespeare begins by reading the plays for pure pleasure and ends by reading them for greater pleasure. In the meantime, he may, so to speak, have taken them to pieces, examined their construction, looked at the words in which they are written with a microscope, traced their historical connections, gone back to their sources. In doing this work of analysis—for it is necessary to take a thing to pieces in order to find out how it is put together—he may become so much interested in the detail of the work that he loses sight of Shakespeare altogether and becomes a student of language, grammar, the structure of style, the evolution of the drama. This is what sometimes happens to the scholar; in studying what may be called the mechanics of a work of art he loses sight of the art itself. To such a student the plays of Shakespeare become a quarry out of which great masses of knowledge may be taken. This is the study of Shakespeare's language, methods, construction; but it is not the study

of Shakespeare; and it is with the study of Shakespeare that this paper concerns itself.

The best approach to a great book is by the way of simple enjoyment. If I am to see the Sistine Madonna for the first time I wish, above all things, to give myself up to the pure delight of looking at the most beautiful picture ever painted by man; I wish to surrender myself to the great painter and let his thought, expressed on the canvas, sink clear and deep into my spirit. I wish to keep myself out of sight; to postpone analysis, minute study of detail, the critical attitude. First and foremost I want to hear what Raphael has to say, and I can best do that by keeping silent myself. After I have heard him I can argue with him, criticise him, condemn him if I choose; but I must first hear him to the end and without interruption.

In like manner, if I wish to know Shakespeare, I must give him a full, free opportunity of telling me what he thinks of life, how he understands it, what it means as its workings are revealed in the careers of men and women; and if I am to get any impression of his way of telling his story I must surrender myself to him and let him do what he can with me. These are the first things I must do; and, if I care more for the substance of things than for their peculiarities of structure, more for the truth they have to impart than for the order of words in which they impart that truth, more for the living spirit than for the skeleton in which it is lodged, these are the things to which I shall come back when I have taken the plays to pieces and examined their mechanism with a microscope. The end of art is to deepen the sense of life and to give delight and exhilaration; any kind of study which secures these results is good; all kinds which miss them are bad.

To begin with, then, the student of Shakespeare is to remember that he is dealing with a great human

spirit and not with a mass of literary material; that he is never to lose the feeling of reverence which such a spirit inspires; that he is handling human documents and not the stuff of which grammars and rhetorics are made. To keep the mind open, the heart tender, the imagination responsive: these are the prime qualities in our friendships for one another, and they are the prime qualities in our friendships with the great writers.

This vital study, for the man who wishes to know Shakespeare and does not expect to gain an expert's knowledge of Shakespeare's works, is a very simple matter. All fundamental ways of dealing with the great realities are simple; it is the tricks of manner, the skill with small details, which are abstruse and obscure. To know Shakespeare one needs, first of all, a good edition of his works; this means a well-printed and well-bound set of the plays and poems, of a size that is easy and comfortable to the hand. There are several editions of small size, but printed from large, clear type, which have the advantage of fitting into a pocket without discomfort. If one has little, or even a great deal of time at command it is a matter of prime importance to keep Shakespeare within reach; to be able to put ten or twenty minutes into reading "Hamlet" or "The Tempest" on a train, in a cable car, or while one is waiting at a station. Many men have educated themselves by using the odds and ends of time which most people waste because they have never learned what Mr. Gladstone called "thrift of time."

Having become the possessor of a good edition of the works, read them through as you would read a novel, giving yourself up to the interest of the story. People forget that many of the plays were suggested to Shakespeare by the stories of his time and of earlier times, and that every one of them is a condensed novel. If Shakespeare were not placed so high on the shelves as a great classic it is probable that more people would

read him for simple entertainment; for he is one of the most interesting writers in the world. Many of the plays carry the reader along without any effort on his part; just as "The Mill on the Floss," "Vanity Fair," "The Tale of Two Cities," and "The Scarlet Letter" carry him along. Many men have gained their most vivid impressions of English history from the historical plays, and at least one English statesman has not hesitated to confess that Shakespeare taught him nearly all the English history he knew.

Read the plays, therefore, and reread them continually; for after one is familiar with the story one begins to be interested in the people, anxious to understand them and to know why they think, speak, and act as they do. Great books, like the men who make them, are many-sided and cannot be seen at the first glance; one must approach them from different points of view, as one must approach a mountain if one is to have an adequate idea of its size and shape. One must read the plays many times before one hears all they have to say and sees clearly what Shakespeare is trying to do; and as one reads he reads with increasing insight and with more deliberation. He gets first a view of the whole scene which Shakespeare spreads before him, and then he begins to recognize the number and variety of the objects which are grouped together and combined in a whole.

This familiarity is the beginning of intimacy, and so naturally and inevitably leads on to the best and truest knowledge that very little suggestion need be made to the man who has begun to read the plays frequently and regularly because he enjoys them. Have the plays at hand in a convenient form, carry one with you if you are to have any leisure moments, cut down the time you give to newspapers, put aside the miscellaneous books you have been in the habit of reading or are tempted to read, and study your Shakespeare as often and regularly as you can; if you do this Shake-

speare will meet you more than half way and reveal himself to you in ways you will not suspect at the start.

You will not need, at the beginning, any elaborate apparatus of books of reference. There are many admirable books about Shakespeare which you may wish to read and to own later, but at the start you will not need them. The best editions of Shakespeare supply all the information essential to the beginner. They contain introductions which tell you when each play was written, where the materials were found, how each play is related to the other plays, and convey other information which helps you to understand each play and put it in its proper place; and they also contain notes which explain historical and other references and allusions, the uses of words, obscure passages, and disputed points. Add to a good edition of the plays Mr. Sidney Lee's biography, a concordance of the plays, Professor Dowden's "Shakespeare's Mind and Art," and read the essays on Shakespeare by Coleridge, Lowell, Bagehot and other standard writers, whose works you will find in the libraries, and you have all the machinery of study you need. Read, in addition, the history of Shakespeare's age in English history as it is told in Green's "History of the English People."

The time will probably come when you will desire a closer intimacy with the dramatist who has so broadened your knowledge of human nature. It will be stimulating, too, with one or more friends who are of your mind, to begin a more systematic study, which need not demand too much time. There are a number of excellent manuals which present suggestions for careful and thorough study of the plays.

The following "Suggestions for Study" are taken from the programme of a literary society in New York City, and may serve as one example of the kind of guidance needed by students in the earlier stages of Shake-

spearian study. This society devoted a number of evenings to the play of "Macbeth," and to the special consideration of "The Nature of Poetry."

The Tragedy of Macbeth

Suggestions for Study.—Read the whole play carefully, then read it a second time. Consider the plot and principal characters. Has it a distinct moral purpose? Has it a historical basis? Sources of plot, and incidents. Reasons why it is a great drama. What is a drama? a tragedy? a comedy? Does "Macbeth" contain genuine and lofty poetry? Which is the strongest passage in the play and why? Name some of the character qualities of Lady Macbeth. Are Shakespeare's women inferior to his men? Was Macbeth a poet? What does the knocking at the gate typify? What the sleep-walking scene? The weird sisters: why does Shakespeare make them real, instead of introducing them to Macbeth in a dream? what do they stand for in the play? Who has the more conscience, Macbeth or Lady Macbeth? What utterances or what actions prove it? How do you explain Macbeth's hesitancy before the murder, and his resolute energy and audacity afterward? What is the clew to the great change in the will power of Macbeth?

What is the difference between Lady Macbeth and the two sisters in "King Lear"? In what does Macbeth's punishment consist? What one word contains it all? Was Macbeth a coward? If he was a coward, how do you explain his bravery in battle? If he was not a coward, how do you explain his hesitancy and scruples? What broke down Lady Macbeth at the end? Was it the same cause which broke down Macbeth himself? Malcolm and Macduff: were they cowards in fleeing for their lives? Did anything justify

Macduff in leaving his family? What is there essentially significant about the play of "Macbeth," more than the obvious truth that "murder will out"? Do you regard this as Shakespeare's greatest tragedy? If so, why? What elements determine the greatness of a play?

Required Reading.—"Macbeth."

Suggested Readings.—Tennyson's "The Foresters." "Hamlet."

Suggestions for Study.—What is poetry? What are the qualities that differentiate it from prose? What is lyric poetry? Are psalms and hymns lyric poetry? What is the meaning of the phrase, "Lyric beauty in Shakespeare's plays"? Describe "epic," "lyric," and "dramatic" poetry. Define the words "ode," "sonnet," and "elegy." Is Shakespeare the greatest English dramatist? Define the essential qualities of a great drama. Can love of poetry and other literature be acquired? Elements of great poetry; originality; charm; great subjects greatly treated; correct poetic construction; vital ideas coherently worked out must quicken the emotions. Beauty of simple poetry in "Dora" and Book of Ruth. No metaphor, figure of speech, or decorative adjective in "Dora." The meaning of iambic pentameter, dactyllic hexameter, etc. What is "Society Verse"? Is there such a thing as "American" poetry? Characteristics of the poetry of the nineteenth century. The spiritual element in poetry. Contemporary and universal interest in poetry. Literature of knowledge and literature of power: define each. The Bible in Tennyson and other poets. Study a poem as a whole, its plan, story, plot, vital idea, and larger teaching; note the meaning of paragraphs, sentences, phrases, and the use of words.

Suggested Readings.—A selection of the best short poems in the English language. Mr. Edmund Clarence Stedman's "The Nature of Poetry."